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Abused siblings set Conte on mission

By LARRY BIVINS
Tennessean Washington Bureau

First lady speaks at child conference

WASHINGTON — Tennessee first lady Andrea Conte still wonders about the fate of a 16-year-old named Mildred and her two brothers whose story she said yesterday was a huge factor in her decision to become an advocate for abused children.



Andrea Conte

As keynote speaker for the National Children's Alliance Leadership Conference, Conte related how the young girl, who had a child of her own, wept upon revealing that her father was "on top of her every night" at a rundown Seattle hotel at which she shared a room with her two brothers.

And Conte recalled the look on the boys' faces as she helped them prepare to move to a foster home, several miles away from their sister.

She worked with foster children as part of her training for a nursing degree at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Their faces were like little masks," the wife of Gov. Phil Bredesen told about 200 child advocates attending the conference. "They didn't say much on the way out of the city, but I know they were scared."

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The Mildred episode, Conte said, was one of two major encounters that fueled her passion to speak out against domestic abuse and violence.

The other was being the victim of a violent attack herself more than 10 years ago in Nashville.

From that, she said, "I got an inside view of the law enforcement and criminal justice systems, and it opened my eyes to the need for everyday citizen involvement with crime and justice in our communities and country."

Conte formed an advocacy group called You Have the Power ... Know How to Use It Inc. that seeks to raise awareness to crime and abuse issues, focusing on victims. She also has become a proponent of child advocacy centers.

While in Washington, she said she intends to impress upon lawmakers the importance of child advocacy centers in hopes of securing \$14 million in funding for the centers that was proposed under a law creating a national missing children's alert system.

Nancy Chandler, a Memphis native and director of the Washington-based Children's Alliance, said she was awed by Conte's commitment to children's advocacy.

"It gives me goose bumps to know that there is someone like you fighting for kids in Tennessee," Chandler said. "I've been a social worker for 30 years and have met a lot of Mildreds."

Conte acknowledged that while she had to be "dragged kicking and screaming into a life of politics" she has come to appreciate having the bully pulpit at her disposal.

Bredesen was mayor of Nashville for eight years before being elected governor in November.

Yet despite all her outspokenness on abuse and violence over the years, Conte said she still regrets not saying anything to authorities about Mildred's allegations of sexual abuse by her father.

"That man got off scot-free, was never confronted about his behavior and never held accountable for what he did," she said.



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